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AUTHOR Comber, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores some ongoing dilemmas facing literacy educators, employing a combination of fictional accounts and summaries of actual instances during literacy lessons. Noting that the Commonwealth of Australia's recent policy/monograph is entitled "Literacy for All: The Challenge for Australian Schools," the paper points out that there are perennial questions relating to how different children acquire differential literacies from their experiences of schooling and how schooling and assessment practices might be reformed to offer equitable literacy outcomes. The paper first re-examines some pervasive and dangerous myths about who the "all" (as in "Literacy for All") are and how the "all" already include divided populations. Second, it turns to how institutions confer credits (or otherwise) on different children differently for what they bring to school. Third, the paper argues that in these times it is absolutely necessary that the literacies made available to young people in schools are multiple, inclusive, critical, sophisticated, and pleasurable. It suggests that schooling is and should be about more than just literacy in any narrow sense of the concept. The paper concludes with six questions to think about regarding literacy practices. (Contains 29 references.) (NKA)

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B. Comber

ED 444 139

Literacies, contingent repertoires and school success

Barbara Comber

Language and Literacy Research Centre
Faculty of Education
University of South Australia
Holbrooks Road Underdale SA 5032
barbara.comber@unisa.edu.au

The Garth Boomer Memorial Address to the Joint National Conference of the Australian Literacy Educators Association and the Australian English Teachers Association, The Canberra School of Music, Canberra, July 7, 1998.

Max (that's short for Maxine) entered the classroom, swiped her smart card, punched in her pin number and was greeted by her teacher. She surveyed her peers. Jo and Robin were checking each otherís tazos and arranging swaps for recess time. Alex and Micky were saying rude words next to Jung and Benjamith. Kyle and Brucie were already eating their lunch. Troyette and Jaymie were in the 'home corner' -- again. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied Blye. He'd already changed his home reader and was opening a new file. What level it was, she couldn't tell…, but she could hear the teacher spouting praise and see her smiling face. Another day at school had begun. Max sat down, arranged her body so that she was ready to read and noted that many of her class were not switched on. Some weren't even in the room. Some weren't logged on. Some no doubt had left their smart cards at home; some had forgotten their pin numbers and some didn't have a smart card at all. Lucky she was not one of those kids…

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We'll come back to Maxine and her unplugged peers later, but no doubt you get the picture. The semi-futuristic account is intended to make the familiar strange -- to raise questions about what the ësmart cardsí are for today's kindergarten kids and who has them, whoís tuned in and who isn't.

Each weekday young people arrive at schools variously willing-ready-or able to take up what is on offer there. And of course others don't arrive…. Every afternoon they go somewhere else… home. Young people have to be able to make the connections between these different institutions, their associated practices and the languages and literacies in use. In this paper I explore some ongoing dilemmas facing literacy educators. To do so I employ a combination of fictional accounts (Max and her peers) and summaries of actual instances during literacy lessons.

I begin by considering the conference theme, and indeed the first half of the title of the Federal Government's recent policy/monograph, Literacy For All: The Challenge for Australian Schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 1998). It is interesting to think about how it is that, in a country where 'schooling for all' is a rhetorical given, we need to legislate for literacy, why we have to insist on 'all'. Yet we do need to insist on 'all', whilst remaining open to what the literacies might be and the (im)possibility that particular repertoires of literate practices might work for 'all'. Perennial questions relate to:

1) how different children acquire differential literacies from their experiences of schooling; and

2) how schooling and assessment practices might be reformed to offer equitable literacy outcomes.

These are by no means new questions. First, I re-examine some pervasive and dangerous myths about who the 'all' are and how the 'all' already includes divided populations. Second, I turn to how institutions confer credits (or otherwise) on different children differently for what they bring to school. Third, I argue that in these times it is absolutely necessary that the literacies made available to young

people in schools are multiple, inclusive, critical, sophisticated and pleasurable. I suggest that schooling is and should be about more than just literacy in any narrow sense of the concept.

- 'These Kids' and 'Home Backgrounds'
- The Catch 22 of Readiness/School Success
- Literacies Plus: Benchmarks that Count?

'These kids' and 'home backgrounds'

One trend internationally in post-industrialised nation states (including for example, Canada, United States and Australia) is the high proportion of children living in relative poverty in lower bands of performance on standardised literacy testing. The recent National English Literacy Survey (Australian Council for Educational Research 1997) makes it clear that this pattern continues in Australia today. In one sense we should hardly be surprised by this, as children living in poverty are more likely to have to deal with a range of living conditions which impact on their well-being, including family illness, unemployment, poor nutrition, transience, isolation and so on. Such material realities are often overlooked in accounts of children's differential performance. Given that children living in poverty have both a greater likelihood of physical difficulties to contend with and less access to the economic, social and cultural privileges that count, what they are able to access and make use of at school takes on a heightened importance. It would be a real 'disgrace' if Australia were to replicate the situation in some states of America where socio-economically disadvantaged children are given a 'pedagogy of poverty' -- a minimalist curriculum with an emphasis on a limited set of 'basics' and behaviour (Haberman 1991). In Australia, it seems we have an opportunity to do something different, to continue the rich tradition of innovation in literacy education, much of which, it's important to note, was sponsored by the federal government's Disadvantaged Schools Program.

Despite policy and funding initiatives, there is much we don't understand about how and why some children are failed by mainstream schooling. Much practitioner knowledge remains untapped and the history of research on children's transitions from home to school is riven with limitations in the available conceptual tools for explaining children's lifeworlds - their cultural, linguistic and material resources,

their family and household arrangements, and the realities of their daily lives. Indeed, often all that is not explicitly part of the institutional world of school is relegated to the term 'background' (Comber 1997). Social scientists and educational researchers attempt to explain differential educational performances in terms of children's 'family background', 'socio-economic background', 'cultural background' and so on. Such a process attributes children's performance in school as causally related to demographic categories, whilst rhetorically assigning it to the status of ' background'. However, what is clear from recent research conducted in Australia (Cairney et al. 1995; Hill et al., 1998, forthcoming; Freebody et al. 1995; Louden and Rivalland 1995; Luke et al. 1993) and internationally (Dyson 1993, 1997; Heath 1983; Polakow 1993) is that children's lives are by no means 'background' in how they make the transition to schooling, how they make use of what school offers and how long they stay at school and with what success. The educational research community has yet to devise analytic tools which adequately take into account differences in children's current life worlds and histories, without simultaneously consigning them to static categories or unwittingly attributing deficit associations that accompany membership in particular disadvantaged groups (Dyson et al. 1995; Luke 1997).

Research into literacy education is similarly hamstrung (Freebody & Welch 1993). Indeed, attempts to avoid the limits of deficit discourses have on occasion led to euphemistic namings of poverty and other forms of material disadvantage in terms of 'home background'. The eclipsing of 'poverty' and 'racism' with 'softer' and more abstract terms such as 'difference' or even 'disadvantage' can deflect attention away from the very things that affect how children grow up, the resources that are available to them and their families in order to make ready for school, and how schools might make ready for the very different children who walk through their gates.

Explanations of performance based upon the unproblematic usage of 'home background' and 'family background' can provide fodder for those who would lay blame with families for some groups of children's poor academic performance, whilst at the same time taking credit for the successes of other children as the outcomes of effective schooling. Children's home and family lives do not simply disappear when they begin schooling. They take with them to school their health and ill-health and their contrastive accumulations of privileges and disadvantages (economic, cultural, social, symbolic and linguistic capital).

How, whether, and to what extent children take up what teachers make available is inextricably connected with the repertoires of practices and knowledges children already have. It is schooling as an institution that 'backgrounds' or excludes some experiences, knowledges and practices and that has the potential to count others as forms of capital. An urgent project is to identify how particular repertoires of behaviours, dispositions, attitudes and knowledges count (or otherwise) in particular school sites and to generate some frameworks for practitioners to use in reconsidering the connections between children's home, community and school lives in terms of language and literate practices.

In a recently completed study of children's literacy experiences prior to school and in the first year of schooling , in which I was involved, the research team noted the very great differences in children's literate competences before schooling and the way that these differences increased exponentially after nine months of schooling (Hill et al., 1998, forthcoming). In that study we made the case that students' lives are not background to what occurs in school and that there is an urgent need for teachers to understand what life is like for different children and to anticipate the worlds children will live in later in their lives, employed, unemployed or underemployed. Literacy educators need to update our sociological, economic and political analyses in order to design curricula which are going to be generative for young people beyond the school gates. What are the literate practices they might use for pleasure, social action, communicative purposes and different forms of employment? In what ways do children's different linguistic, social and cultural resources and dispositions count as credits or debits early in their school lives? And it is to contrastive instances noted in that study to which I turn now.

But before I do let's check out Maxine and her peers. This time let's eavesdrop around the desktops of Kyle and Brucie who have finished eating their lunch and about to sit down - together - of course.

Wanna play footy at recess. Nah. Let's play Power Rangers. Nah let's play Rocky and I'll be Rocky.

Bruce and Kyle are you with us?……[Silence]… Tune in. Eyes to me.
……[Silence]…

Nah, you was Rocky last time, it's my turn.

This morning girls and boys we're going to write a recount about what you did yesterday. And what was yesterday?

Sundee.

Mmm good try Kyle.

I know the footy and…

Yes thank you Brucie, but your hand wasn't up. What would you say Maxine?

The weekend.

That's right it was the weekend wasn't it. So we're going to write a recount of what you did on the weekend.

I went to the footy with me bruvver and his girlfriend and I got their hot chips when they wasn't looking, 'cos the Saints gotta a goal and Jason was spewing mad. But the Crows won! Nah they didn't 'cos I saw-aw, 'cos I was there-ere and you weren't. I don't care-are. The Crows is way better. The Crows are a mob of fairies - that what Jason says.

Kyle and Brucie I cannot see you. Fingers ready, eyes to me. Kyle you've been disconnected. Are you with us… good. Let's do a recount together. What did you do on the weekend Maxine?

Well, on the weekend, my dad, my mum and my little brother and sister, well we all went to the Family Computing Show and then we went to a restaurant for tea.

How exciting.

I hate that Maxine…don't you?

Would you like to share what you did Brucie?

Nup.

The Catch 22 of Readiness/School Success

I move now to the project mentioned above. A team of researchers located in three states researched one hundred children in the last three months of their preschool lives and the first six to nine months of their school lives. JoAnne Reid (then at Ballarat University, now at the University of New England, Armidale), Judith

Rivalland and Bill Louden at Edith Cowan University, and Susan Hill and myself from the University of South Australia worked with five schools and their feeder preschools, daycare centres and families to investigate the connections between children's prior to school experiences and their literacy learning in the first year of school. The project, originally framed as longitudinal case studies, ultimately incorporated both qualitative case studies of twenty children and a large corpus of quantitative assessment data of the entire cohort (100 children).

We have recently submitted a report of this study to DEETYA, though we believe that we still have much to learn from this intense and varied project and intend to keep re-visiting the data and re-exploring the complexities of what it has to teach us. There is insufficient time here to explain the entire research study and I have already alluded to one of the key findings in regard to the very great differences in children's literacy performances even before they begin schooling. There are traces of our findings in the fictional stories of Maxine and her peers. Here I discuss just a few instances from the research which leave me with some challenging questions concerning who brings what to the literacy curriculum and what difference it makes. I want to consider the idea that some children may appear 'ready' because they come with a selective repertoire of social and communicative practices upon which school literacy learning is contingent. In contrast other children may appear 'unready' for school literacy learning because their participative repertoires are different from those required for literacy lessons.

So let me call on brief stories of three children Mark, Tessa and Alan in the early months of schooling to illustrate what I mean , but I want to point out that the issues I raise are by no means restricted to the early years of schooling. Issues of identity and cultural practices remain significant to students throughout schooling and beyond. The three children whose experiences I refer to here all live in walking distance from the school. Two have extended families in the local area. All were born in Adelaide, yet all have grandparents and parents who speak English as a second language. All have older brothers and or sisters already attending the school and all went to the local preschool. All live in two parent families.

Mark: a very knowing child

Mark entered school in the second intake of receptions at the beginning of second

term of the year. Each day began with reading time, where the class sat in a circle on the floor with their books. Along with the teacher Kevin, several parents and a school support officer listened to individual children read during this time. Mark had been at school just five weeks when the following observations were made. He was talking to his older partner about a Sunshine book which he had taken home the previous evening. That Mark clearly recognised the importance of not losing his reader is evident in his concern that his partner might inadvertently put his book in the wrong book bag .

Mark: Is this mine? [Looks in his book bag to see if his copy is in there. He then pulls out another book, which the older boy reads to him.] You're not going to take it home [referring to his book, which his partner has just read to him. Mark rereads his 'I Like' book.] Do the opposite way. [George offers Mark a book to read and they swap. When they are finished Mark's concern for his book is once again evident.] You're not taking this home.

Being responsible for one's 'home reader' is an extremely important lesson to learn in the early weeks of school. In many ways it is the lynch-pin of the initial literacy program -- the symbolic as well as actual initiation marker of the school-literate-child-to-be. Department stores and parents clubs and trading tables compete for the book bag market! Knowing the significance of the book is no small lesson in the politics of schooling. But back to Mark. At this point in reading time Kevin declared that he would hear one more person read and Mark was selected. He took a new book, 'The Balloons', from his bag. The highly repetitive structure and supportive picture cues helped Mark read the book aloud to Kevin. When Mark finished, Kevin asked him to identify the word 'balloon' which he was able to do. Kevin then asked Mark to identify a number of letters, which he proceeded to do, confusing only 'd' for 'b'. After showing Mark how to tell the difference between a 'd' and a 'b' using thumb and fists of his left and right hand, Kevin asked him to find an 'a' which Mark was able to do, whereupon Kevin remarked, 'You know quite a few letters don't you Mark'.

Being able to sound and look like a reader counts as competence in early childhood classrooms (Baker and Freebody, 1993). In the above episode, Mark displayed competence in a number of important early literacy skills in the public forum of the classroom and, just as importantly, he was seen to be competent. A further example of Mark's preparedness to display his competence is provided in following transcript

where the year ones are invited to revise how to read a clock face.

Kevin: We've got another writing job to do in a minute, but before we do that, we need to look at time. Even receptions can listen to this. What's the time Mr Wolf? Who can tell us which hand tells us what hour it is? [Mark has his hand up, but is not asked]

Student: The little fat hand.

Kevin: Here's a time for the Year 1s. [Mark moves back from the group, Kevin spots him] You might pick this even though it's not reception work. [Mark moves back puts his head on his hand. Kevin makes half past nine on the clock] Ricky?

Ricky: Half past nine. [Next Kevin makes twenty past twelve on the clock. Mark has his hand up.]

Kevin: Yes sweetheart? [Gesturing to Mark to answer]

Mark: Twenty past twelve.

Kevin: Here's a little person who can tell the time. He doesn't need to do the little people's work, because he can already tell the time.

Again Mark displayed competence which is highly valued in this classroom. In a multi-aged composite class, it was a matter of status to be able to do more than a 'reception/little person' can normally do. It is not only that Mark knew how to read the clock or to identify letters, but also that he was prepared to display what he knew (and what he didn't) and that he did so readily in the public forum of the classroom. It is not that he sought attention or 'showed off' in any way, but that he strategically responded to opportunities. Mark suffered from a number of physical disabilities (including muscular weakness in his hands and poor eyesight) which made handwriting extremely difficult and copying from the board impossible, but he was extremely adept in eliciting direct and frequent assistance from older peers and his teacher.

To sum up, after only five weeks of schooling Mark was reading the culture of the classroom, displaying competence on request, eliciting help when needed. When tested prior to school, Mark was not unusually precocious with regard to his literacy.

He demonstrated a greater than average knowledge of numbers which seemed likely to be related to his considerable preschool experience with Maths games on the computer with his older brother. Mark did not have a collection of books and nobody read him bedtime stories. He disliked children's television, but loved the video movie Rocky which he replayed many times and incorporated into his fantasy play. Mark's first language was Korean (his family had settled in Australia from South Korea ten years earlier); he suffered physical disabilities which made classroom reading and writing difficult; he was described by his mother as 'not bright' like his older brother, 'but very good', yet he appeared ready to be successful at school. Within weeks, he had already graduated from a ëlittle personí who does not know to a person who knew many significant things.

Tessa: a proactive student in the making

The first observation of Tessa at school occurred in her second week at the beginning of term two. She was one of several children who had just commenced school and gone into Eleni's reception/one/two composite class. On this occasion a new topic, 'the sun' was being introduced. Tessa sat in the middle and close to the teacher on the mat.

Eleni: Today girls and boys we're going to start with the sun. Put your white hat on 'cos you're going to tell me what you know about the sun. [Children shut eyes. Part of a routine for changing the 'de Bono thinking hats'.] Open your eyes. OK What do you know about the sun? What is a white hat?

Tessa: Yes. A planet's hat? [Tessa doesn't yet understand the thinking hats routine but tries to make sense of the task. Eleni nods to George to answer.]

George: Facts

Eleni: [Nodding yes to 'facts'.] What do we all know about the sun and the moon?

Student: The sun is burning because it's millions and millions of gases rubbing together and they burn. [Eleni repeats this statement word by word as she writes it on the blackboard.]

In the brief pedagogical exchanges above several features of Tessa's approach to studentship begin to emerge. The same intense determination and will to participate,

as had been witnessed prior to her starting school, was in evidence early in the lesson as she tried to make sense of the new pedagogical events in which she found herself. And this of course was not without problems. What Tessa lacked was basic training in de Bono's 'thinking hats'. Eleni did not revise the technique here, but noted the problem exhibited in Tessa's answer and returned to it later. She scribed each contribution on the blackboard, stopping to comment verbally only in relation to the offerings of the new reception children, Tessa and Molly, although she usually smiled and nodded as children made their contributions.

Student: The sun's hot.

Helen: The sun is round.

Alan: It is orange.

Student: No

Eleni: We're not saying, 'Yes or 'no'. And as we learn we will tick these off. [Explaining that they will come back to the list they are building and check off what's right or wrong later.]

Crystal: The sun is yellow.

Josh The sun is pointy.

Molly: The sun is boiling hot.

Eleni: Good try.

Alex: The sun gives you light.

Tessa: [Has her hand up and is chosen, but says nothing and Eleni gestures to the next child]

Ella: The sun has a red spot in the middle 'cos it keeps it hot.

An: The sun is made of fire.

F. Student: Yeah but how did they make it?

Tessa: The sun is ... um… [long pause]

Eleni: Think about the information in your head before you put your hand up.

Shayna: If you land on the sun you'll burn.

Eleni: So you cannot go to the sun. [Smiling.] OK any boys. [Eleni tried to keep a balance between boys' and girls' speaking turns.]

Josh: A long long time ago there was not sun, before the dinosaurs roamed the earth.

Tessa: The sun is very dangerous.

Eleni: Why can it be dangerous Tessa?

Tessa: 'Cos you might burn yourself. [Eleni smiles and nods.]

As the lesson proceeded, we see Tessa refining her attempts at active participation. On the second occasion she was selected, Tessa had no answer ready and her teacher advised her to think about the information 'in her head' before she put her hand up, but the signs were positive: she had already picked up the stem of the sentence, 'The sun is…' . Just a few turns on, and undeterred by her two previous unsuccessful turns, she eventually produced a full answer and it was an answer that worked. Tessa could perform the physical motions required, but on the first few occasions she didn't quite manage to coordinate the physical display with the verbal and conceptual displays. She had not yet understood the teacher's logic for the lesson, but she was working on it and with direct feedback from her teacher she finally managed to put the whole sequence together. The point to note here is how actively Tessa worked to unravel how to participate as a student in this context. Because children bidding for turns is such a common place of everyday school life, it is strange to think about it as a practice which must be learnt.

After several months at school, Tessa was observed in a series of lessons where the teachers and children had been talking about sexual and racial harassment as a part of a whole school project. Discussions were conducted with single sex groupings. The boys had gone to the library with the parent liaison teacher and the girls, including Tessa, had stayed with their teacher, Eleni. Their task was to think about what they liked about aspects of 'their culture', not an easy task. Many children in the classrooms we observed appeared to have considerable difficulty with questions of culture and where they came from. In Tessa's class few of the children contributed much to the discussion and Tessa said nothing at all.

On returning to her desk, Tessa began to draw on the small white piece of paper she had been allocated for the purpose. She drew two female figures, one larger than the other. Out of the mouth of the smaller figure she drew a speech balloon and wrote some Greek letters.

As I watched her and took notes about what she was doing (sitting opposite on the other side of the table) she leaned over the table and said, 'You wrote my name'. 'That's right. I did, because I'm writing about what you're doing', I replied. 'Can you show me where I wrote it?'. Tessa leaned across the table and pointed correctly to the places I had written her name (so much for being the unobtrusive researcher!). After only several months at school, she was reading my upside-down messy adult cursive. Still a little surprised at being 'sprung' by my five yearold research subject, I complimented her, 'Well done. I'm surprised you can read my messy handwriting'. Tessa responded, nodding and smiling, 'I can!'.

Tessa then went back to colouring her picture. When Eleni arrived at the table she noticed the Greek letters in the speech balloon accompanying Tessa's drawing. Eleni, who speaks and reads Greek herself, immediately read, "Grandma" and added, 'That says "Grandma"'. Quite apart from a demonstration of Tessa's astuteness as an observer of classroom life it also signals that she was able to make decisions about when and how to display particular understandings. Her hand no longer went up at every question. In fact it could have appeared that Tessa had little to say about the topic, ëcultureí, but as her drawing and writing demonstrated she knew exactly what was being discussed. Tessa was able to use her knowledge of Greek language and culture as a resource in her first term of school and she was able to elicit the kinds of pedagogical responses which took her further with her understandings of written and spoken language. Her approach to school life and academic learning was proactive. She made mistakes, but these became occasions for learning. Her openness to public display, both of her understandings and misunderstandings, meant that her teachers were able to give the help she needed.

Before Tessa began school her mother, Sofia, commented, 'Drawing, writing- that's her'. Reading and writing were Tessa's preferred forms of pleasure along with watching children's videos and ABC children's television. It became clear that she made considerable demands on her older brother, grandmother and mother to teach

her the alphabet (in both languages) and to read to her.

Sofia: Yeah reading and she does a lot of writing and I help her spell out words. So we do a lot of that and my mother also, but she does it with the Greek side. But yeah she wants to know so we sit and help her.

Eleni: She asks?

Sofia: She asks for it, yeah. …She is very...she knows what she wants and she's very - what's the word - determined, to get her own way or to do something that she wants to do and she wants to do it well. If she is drawing and her brother comes up and does something on her sheet she'll get very upset. She'll get rid of that and do it again because she wants it perfect.

Tessa's initiation of literacy events clearly predated her starting school. She had developed strategies for getting the help she needed.

At school, both Mark and Tessa indicated that they were actively reading the classroom culture and what their teachers valued, and altering their behaviours accordingly. Within a few weeks, Tessa had worked out that morning talks in her classroom were most favourably received when the child speaker brought in things they had made or done at home, such as drawings, attempts at writing and spelling and so on, rather than toys or shop-bought products. Mark had worked out how to use his knowledge of numbers to reposition himself as somewhere above 'a little reception'. Tessa recognised her teacher as a fellow member of the Greek community who valued and encouraged children's use of their home language in both talking and writing at school. Children who spoke other languages which Eleni did not speak or write herself, were also invited to translate, to demonstrate how they would say or write words in their home languages. Both Mark and Tessa discovered quickly what counted for their teachers and their peers and how to work the classroom to get what they needed. They were able to cash in their intellectual, cultural and linguistic resources in the classroom context. Their participative repertoires -- their willingness to display their knowledge and to elicit help -- meant that they often received the feedback, advice and teaching they needed at just the right time. These capacities to 'read' the institutional ethos, knowing when and how to be visible and audible, were already in evidence in the preschool and at home where they actively made good use

of the available material (eg computers, tutor systems, book collections) and human resources (grandparents, peers, siblings, preschool teachers and parents).

Alan: always forever unready?

Alan was observed in the early weeks of his school life during the morning literacy period which usually included morning news; the day allocated to Alan was Wednesday. Of the three Wednesdays Alan was observed, he only gave morning news once. On the first occasion he declined. On the second Wednesday, when the class had a relieving teacher, Alan was ready to give his news, but time ran out. Finally on the third Wednesday, when Margie, his teacher, read out the names of the children to give news, Alan agreed. He had already placed a Power Rangers toy in the news box. When nominated he jumped up to collect it and went to the front of the class.

Alan: Good morning boys and girls [a soft voice]

Unison: Good morning Alan.

Alan: Well I got this. (…inaudible…) [He demonstrates what the toy can do, moving parts of the toy and giving vocalisations for the character.]

M Student: That's Adrian's.

Alan: No it's not.

M Student: But it's like Adrian's. [Alan continues to talk about the toy, but so softly that he can't be heard.]

Margie: You'll have to speak louder. [Alan appears to stumble, and not know what else to say. Margie intervenes.]

Margie: When did you get it?

Alan: I don't know.

Margie: Where did you get it?

Alan: Shop.

Margie: Who gave it to you?

Alan: I don't know [very softly]

Margie: You don't know? Why? [Alan doesn't answer, he sits down. Margie continues to offer encouragement].

Margie: Anything else you want to tell us, Alan? Are there any questions? [Several children put up their hands.]

Alan: Jacob?

Jacob: How come it moves like that?

Alan: 'Cos it's got a dinosaur and it's got a foot....Any more? Theo

[Theo is sitting very close to Alan, and it is difficult to hear his question, and it is also difficult to hear Alan's response.]

Stella: Where did you get it from?

Alan: I don't know. [Alan says this grumpily and Margie steps back in.]

Margie: We had lots of good listeners - two boys and two girls. Alan goes to sit at the back of the group, hands in his lap, rocking forward touching children in front of him.]

Alan initially appeared quite keen to participate in this activity, which he had declined to do on previous occasions. He demonstrated that he had learnt some of the generic structure of morning talk as it was practised in his classroom, but still required assistance from Margie. How the early challenge about ownership of the toy affected his performance is impossible to gauge, but from that point on his voice became difficult to hear until the teacher actually intervened and attempted to support him. The children's questions put Alan on the spot and then Margie's questioning format - when, where, who - coincidentally and unfortunately maintained the accountability tenor of the event. What might have been seen as pedagogical scaffolding or an innocent and neutral question protocol (which these children used almost daily) in this context begins to sound like an inquisition into the ownership of a small plastic toy. In the first weeks of school Alan had already been in trouble for removing toys and food from other children's bags and this had an impact on how his news was received.

Clearly this event didn't work well for Alan. In the preschool and in the literacy testing situations, Alan had demonstrated his discomfort with public performance, so giving a morning talk represented a considerable achievement on his part. However, under the gaze of his teacher and some less than friendly peers, Alan's news ended rather abruptly and he retreated to the back of the class where he began to 'act out'.

Observations in Alan's classroom indicated that extended periods of time were spent sitting, listening to the teacher and to other children. Although there were different activities, such as morning news talk, writing, reading, Greek lesson and resource centre visits, it was not uncommon for Alan and his peers to sit for up to one and a half hours (and a significant proportion of this cross legged on the mat). During another morning news session, the researcher made the following notes.

10.09 Alan is sitting at the side of the group. He is clapping his hands and vocalising, not very loudly, but loud enough to distract the children sitting beside him.

10.10 Alan is fiddling with his shoelaces, head down.

10.11 Alan punches Paul in the lower back. Paul shifts slightly away.

Margie is encouraging the little girl, who is giving morning talk.

Margie: 'Tell us what you were doing'. Alan then puts his fingers in his ears. He hits his shoes, and then plays with the ties from his sweater.

10.13. Alan wriggles back further away from the group on his bottom. He then stretches out his legs, hits his shoes, claps, punches his fists together. Alan then moves over the top of two other children and moves into the book corner. Margie sees him and tells him to move back. He moves, but takes a pencil with him, which he then uses to draw on his shoes. Margie sees this also and tells him to put the pencil away. Alan moves back to the book corner, where he sits for two minutes, then moves back to the edge of the group. Margie then moves, to sit beside Alan. Alan then participates for a short time, putting his hand up (although not selected) when children are asked if they have any questions of the person giving news. The next child begins to give news, Alan begins to flap his arms about, making punching motions and moving up and down on his haunches. Margie touches him gently to remind him to sit still.

10.22 Alan has slowly, almost invisibly, moved on his bottom away from Margie, he

begins to make clicking noises with his mouth. He then crawls over to another child, says something to the child and then begins clicking noises again. He then moves away and sits in front of a girl. He begins bobbing up and down on his haunches. The little girl says 'Excuse me, excuse me I can't see nothing. Excuse me, excuse me'. She becomes quite distressed. Alan ignores her. An older girl beside him touches him and tells him to sit down. He pulls a face at her. He then moves to the back of the group and talks to the boy beside him. He then punches the floor with large arm movements.

10.30 Another child is telling his news. Alan crawls around thumping the floor. He lies down on the floor.

Alan's ways of 'being and doing' (Bourdieu 1990) - his habitus -- is the antithesis to what this early childhood classroom requires of him.

[B]y virtue of the habitus, individuals are already predisposed to act in certain ways, pursue certain goals, avow certain tastes, and so on. Since individuals are the products of particular histories which endure in the habitus, their actions can never be analysed adequately as the outcome of conscious calculation. Rather, practices should be seen as the product of an encounter between a habitus and a field which are, to varying degrees, 'compatible' or 'congruent' with one another, in such a way that, on occasions when there is a lack of congruence (eg. a student from a working-class background who finds himself or herself in an elite educational establishment), an individual may not know how to act and may literally be lost for words. (Thompson [on Bourdieu] 1991: 17)

In the months just before Alan had started school his mother described him as 'a jack-in-the-box' and expressed her concern about whether he would be able to concentrate. She also feared how he would respond to any public attention or being singled out. He had been very sick as a baby and as a toddler and periods of hospitalisation had made him very wary of adult attention. In the preschool he actively avoided the gaze and the help of his teachers. When speaking of his strengths his mother mentioned that his excellent physical coordination and indeed observations of Alan in the preschool confirmed that he was physically very well advanced in terms of using a swing independently, climbing, jumping, somersaulting and moving around the outside spaces. He was already able to ride a two-wheeler bicycle when he began school and knew the rules of the road. While his physical

abilities earned him kudos with his peers in the yard, they counted for little in the literacy classroom.

Successful participation in literacy lessons in Alan's classroom was typically contingent on combinations of verbal interactive repertoires, physical stillness and independent tasks which presented him with major difficulties. In the preschool where there was more opportunity to freely move inside and out across the morning period and where the instructional time on the mat was limited to about a half an hour, this incompatibility was less evident. Indeed, at school, when big books were read aloud in small groups, Alan occasionally appeared eager and interested in participating. However when he was expected to join in the recitation of nursery rhymes and action poems he appeared acutely embarrassed and usually avoided (and sometimes teasingly sabotaged) such public displays. Alan's first school-teacher, Margie was very sensitive to Alan's plight and cooperated with his mother to tactically bring Alan into the norms of classroom life, but she was constrained by particular institutional configurations of space and time. It is not that Alan will not change or that his habitus is fixed or his educational trajectory predetermined; but he will have to acquire the school student habitus over time; he did not come already schooled. Performing on demand; asking for help; and being seen to know are not yet part of Alan's habitus. Consequently he does not yet have a feel for the logic of the school literacy game, because he has not yet experienced himself as a player of such a game (following Bourdieu's notion of 'playing the game' 1990).

It is not that Alan has not yet participated in literacy learning events before he started school. In fact his mother described a number of situations where Alan participated in kitchen table craft, drawing and writing activities with his siblings and also described the ways his older sister played schools with Alan and directed him to read and spell. However the 'proactive studentship' which make Tessa and Mark look so ready for school is not a disposition which Alan has so far acquired.

In a number of social universes, one of the privileges of the dominant, who move in their world as fish in water, resides in the fact that they need not engage in rational computation in order to meet the goals that best suit their interests. All they have to do is follow their dispositions, which being adjusted to their positions, 'naturally' generate practices adjusted to the situation. (Bourdieu 1990: 108)

Tessa and Mark already knew how to elicit adult help, to display knowledge on demand, to display 'pre-competence' (Baker & Freebody, 1993) and competence -- how to be an individuated student. Our close analysis of the twenty case study children suggested that school literacy learning in the early months of school is contingent on selective repertoires of participative practices and forms of studentship. Some children already had these dispositions and could immediately access and participate in what the school provided. Such children quickly accumulate a ledger of positive vocabulary - 'risk-taking', 'breakthrough', 'ready', 'independent', 'off-and-running', 'gifted', 'precocious' etc. For other children school ways of 'being and doing' in literacy lessons are alien or unfamiliar. Their descriptors sometimes call on different discourses, including for instance the medical and the moral - 'immature', 'ADD', 'slow', 'naughty', 'deficient', 'language-delayed' and so on.

I haven't dwelt upon Tessa's, Mark's and Alan's home lives, except to relay the descriptions which their mothers thought important to tell their first school-teachers and the research team. Suffice it to say at this point that there were considerable differences in the socio-economic circumstances and educational attainments of the three sets of parents. Tessa's parents were both university educated and both working in professions (her mother part-time). Mark's father was college educated but not able to use that credential for his Australian position. His mother's educational attainment was undisclosed and she was employed at home at the time. Both Alan's parents were studying at the associate diploma level by correspondence at the time of the research and consequently their financial circumstances were very limited. All the parents highly valued education and spent considerable time with their children on what they saw as important educational and family experiences.

Literacy Plus: Benchmarks that count?

The good news is that after only one term at school, Tessa, Mark and Alan had all made significant gains in their literacy as far as could be ascertained in the ensemble of literacy assessment items we had the children do. The bad, but not surprising, news is that Alan did not make as much progress as Mark or as Tessa, but he did make progress. He was able to identify more letters of the alphabet and more numbers and to make sense of a story using picture clues, but he was unable to decode and encode text. Despite his performance in relation to his peers, his teacher stated that Alan had made slow, steady progress. Getting him to begin writing had been a major achievement. His mother clearly agreed as she had written in his learning folder: 'You have come a long way for a boy who never picked up a pen until school time'.

His teacher said that on reflection Alan had made progress. He had begun to trace over letters and now was able to copy letters from the board. His writing still consisted of strings of letters, but he was having a go. Despite these signs of improvement, Alan was getting into trouble for 'anti-social behaviours'. Knowing how concerned his mother was about Alan, Margie invited her to spend more time in the classroom, hearing other children reading and offering Alan some extra encouragement. This appeared to be making a positive difference to Alan's behaviour.

Alan's difficulties with print are not unusual, nor his incompatibility with school regimes. He had been at school for less than a year. Despite a patient, gentle and highly experienced teacher, there were signs that Alan's transition to school was painful and producing negative effects that might be far-reaching if the pattern was not turned around. One of the major and ongoing difficulties was Alan's discomfort with, and sometimes complete rejection of the pedagogical opportunities made available. Alan's preferred participative repertoires at the beginning of his school life included joking, dramatic role play and physical play with his peers. His repertoire with adults was limited and he appeared to reject his teacher's offers of pedagogical support as yet another occasion of adult surveillance.

Alan's and Margie's achievements should not be discounted. He was improving on both social and academic fronts. However, even his peers were noticing (and commenting on) what he still could not do: that he was not really reading, that he was not really writing, that he was just copying, only pretending. If physical development was benchmarked, Alan would have been a high achiever; if managing pets was benchmarked, Alan would have been a high achiever. If... But that's the catch! Alan's dispositions, his ways of being and doing, were not congruent with the habitus required for early school literacy learning. School literacy learning is contingent upon ways of being that Alan does not have. While he learns to play the school game, his peers are learning to play the literacy game. It's almost as though he is in a different classroom, so differently does he experience it. It's not that he does not have access to explicit teaching. He does. But it does not connect with what matters to Alan. So much of school learning is contingent on children's literacy and so much of children's literacy is contingent upon what they have already learnt how to do and be before they come to school.

I do not want to argue against the importance of early reading and writing, but I do think that other qualities should count as well. At another time at another place in another culture Alan's skills may have counted for more. I do not want to romanticise this at all, but it is interesting to think about the panic and anxiety that the demand for six yearold independent readers produces here in Australia, when in other countries children do not even begin formal schooling or literacy learning until later. We need to be careful about the effects of privileging literacy at the expense of other important capabilities and explore ways that children's existing knowledges, capabilities and interests might be used in the design of school literacies. For instance is there any way that Alan's joking, dramatic role play, physical play, interest in bantam chickens might be used in the literacy classroom? Margie's selection of non-fiction books on insects and spiders already drew him in. What might be done with that? What might be done with Brucie's and Kyle's passion for and knowledge of football and Rocky. Is it contraband in the literacy classroom? Speaking of Kyle and Brucie, let's return for one last peep into their classroom.

Jaymie watched while Troyette recorded their reading logs. Troyette had a Barbie smart card and she had to remember not to confuse that pin number with her LLL card - that's her literacy-learning-log- pin number. She also had a Barbie screen saver. Jaymie would have liked one of those too. But at least she had the Ronald McDonald's electronic book folder for her take-home reader. The girls had left the home corner reluctantly. They had cropped the class photo, focussing on Maxine and Blye, then morphed them to make them look 'older and uglier' (as Troyette had shrieked) then dressed them in old-fashioned wedding gear. They were about to add their balloon text when their teacher reminded them it was reading time. But that's another story. And what of Maxine and Blye? Maxine finished her LLL record early and the teacher asked her to help Brucie and Kyle find the right screen. As she passed Blye's desk she noticed heíd finished LLL too, but heíd gone on to play math-y-gen (subtitled 'Maths for your genius'). How come he doesn't have to help anyone? Maxine quickly solved and Kyle's problem, but as she moved away, the screen went black. She saw Alex with his foot on the power board and Micky giggling behind his hand. She glared at them both and sat down again… She heard the bonus points buzzer on Blye's maths game ring… again.

So where do these fictions and facts take me into the topic of literacy-for-all and the subthemes: home literacy, school literacy and life literacy? What do they add up to?

Let me conclude a six-pack of take-away questions laced with a shot of promising projects.

What if...?

- What if we designed literacy curriculum and assessments around the cultural capital and habitus of different groups of children? What might it look like?

This means teachers learning about and working with family 'funds of knowledge' (Moll 1992). It means designing a 'permeable curriculum', by working with children's resources, including their knowledge of popular culture, as a bridge to school literacies (Dyson 1993; see also Kavanagh 1997). It means allowing children's participative repertoires into the literacy classroom (Au & Mason 1981). It means taking seriously the cliche of working with 'what children bring to school'. It means making tests of literacy less contingent upon exclusive cultural knowledge and linguistic practices.

- What if these designs were infused with an explicit ethos of social justice and community responsibility rather than competitive individualism?

This requires starting from points of view of the most disadvantaged in the community and taking shared responsibility for the success of all its members (Connell, 1993). Helpful questions are provided by James Gee. He argues that we need to examine classroom literacy practices in order to see whether what is going on is 'ethical human discourse' (Gee 1993, p.292). He suggests two key steps: that discursive and educational practices need to be scrutinised, firstly, to check if they harm someone else and secondly, to check whom they advantage over other people. This means recognising teaching, and teaching literacy, as cultural and community practice rather than some kind of neutral cognitive training. Our designs would necessarily include 'more than just literacy' in any narrow sense of the term.

- What if school literacies were fashioned around home literacy and life literacy?

The separation of home, school and life literacies signals a major problem for schooling, and literacy educators in particular. We continue to see these worlds as discreet and unfortunately some young people experience them as having nothing or

little to do with each other. It is not that school can simplistically be modelled upon home, work or community language and literacy practices, but that students and teachers can learn much from an analysis of how language is used in contrastive sites to do particular kinds of work in the world. Research on home, community and workplace literacy practices tells us that literacies are multiple, pleasurable, dangerous and changing phenomena. To treat literacy as static, innocent, universal, singular is highly problematic.

- What if we put aside the panic or paranoia and remembered the potential of young people?

In the not so distant past children were seen as actively making sense of their world: even as 'linguistic detectives' (Heath 1983). Contemporary discourses around young people are infused with anxiety. Young people are frequently constituted as either victims or threats - as 'at risk'. I don't want to discount the very real problems that face young people now and in the future. But I also do not want to lose optimism in what might and can do. As educators we need to believe in what children can learn and can do, not to be driven by our fears of their difference and otherness from us. After watching some video footage taken and produced by young people working on a research and development project on the topic, Information technology in my worlds, Pat Thomson recently wrote after that the students' work indicated that they were 'apprentice theorists' (Thomson, personal communication, 1998). Some negative fall-out from the literacy debates, as they are portrayed in the media, is that students come to be constituted as a problem to be solved and students' literacy as an output to be measured. These leaves little space for reconstituting young people in more educative and promising terms, but we must create it.

- What if we made a play for reinvesting the literacy curriculum with power and pleasure?

There are many complex challenges facing literacy teachers and there are no easy solutions waiting to be purchased out there. However what I believe we lack are clear and systematic detailed accounts of the ways in which some young people with some teachers in some school communities in particular locations are negotiating powerful and pleasurable literacies informed by home and life literacies. Professional associations have a crucial role in sponsoring, documenting and disseminating the ongoing research and practice of teachers in these times, particularly those projects

which take on the hard questions about differential literacies for different young people. In our teacher-research network in South Australia we deliberately encourage research which takes on the hard questions but also has a pleasurable edge.

- What if teachers had time for research, for rejuvenation, for remembering, for more than just literacy?

Regaining time for intellectual and scholarly work amongst teachers - where the agenda is not already preset ---- is urgent business for the educational community. In the network I mentioned above, teachers come together weekends, school holidays and after school to talk about their students and their teaching and to design small-scale classroom school and community based research projects and to discuss what they learn from them. Their topics are self-selected and the range of investigations is considerable from children's understanding of humour in television, unpacking the labels which describe newly arrived students, doing homework in bi- and multi-lingual households, using systemic functional grammar with year ones, building on children's cultural capital and many more. What they tell their mentors in the network is that they like having the time to examine their work, talk about it seriously, ponder what is going on with particular students and to have some fun with like-minded colleagues who are committed to the pleasure and pain of teaching in these times.

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